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# How to get the best ROI on your firm's conference swag

By Rob Burgess
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Conference season is once again heating up in the wealth management industry and seasoned attendees know what that means: swag.

You know: "stuff we all get."

The right piece of swag can become a treasured personal item and turn the user into a walking billboard for the company in question.

But garbage swag, on the other hand, often ends up shoved in the trash by hotel cleaning staff. Worse still, it may subtly damage the reputation of the firm that invested in it.

Experts say firms that provide clever, useful items can provide the highest return on investment (ROI) for their marketing dollars.

## What makes for high ROI swag

Put simply, the swag with the greatest ROI is premium quality and worth keeping. Jensen Savage, CEO of marketing services firm Savage Growth Partners in Chicago, said examples can include portable chargers, insulated water bottles and socks with subtle branding.

"Yes, high-quality swag is more expensive, but it is also important to remember that the more usable something is, the more likely it is to be kept and appreciated long after an event is over," she said.

Items that combine functionality, location relevance and interactivity perform best, said Kathryn Selby, founder of corporate gifting and event merchandise company Swag by Selby in New York City. For example, travel essentials like branded phone cords, name-brand sunscreen or foldable totes can be appreciated by event attendees because they solve immediate needs, she said. One of her firm's most successful swag deployments was for a law firm summit in Boston.

"We provided subtly branded hats and let attendees personalize them with local-themed patches — lobsters, lighthouses and other Boston icons — during the welcome party," Selby said. "It was a low-stress, high-engagement activation that encouraged creativity and resulted in hats people proudly wore throughout the conference and beyond."

Today's conference-goers don't just want a free handout; they want something useful, like good notebooks and tech accessories, said Cyndee Harrison,

principal at marketing and public relations firm Synaptic in Detroit.

"Swag tied to an experience — like interactive giveaways or curated kits that reflect local flavor — gets people talking and keeps your brand top of mind, especially since many of them won't be able to see much of the city where the event is held," she said. "We had a great response to a 'Taste of Atlanta' bag that we assembled at a conference last spring because so many folks told us, 'Oh, now I don't have to buy something at the airport for my kid.'"

Even pens can work, if they have a high-end, expensive feel, said Harrison. Firms can also reserve special giveaways for a subset of attendees.

"Offering a 'tiered' swag experience — where people who spend more time at your booth or book a follow-up get something extra — can boost engagement," she said.

**When the swag is low-effort trash**

Conversely, the worst-performing swag tends to be inexpensive plastic trinkets. Savage said stress balls, slap bracelets or generic pens usually get tossed before the attendee even makes it home.

"Plus, there are so many similar trinkets at any event or trade show, so your swag gets drowned out," she said. "Additionally, event swag reflects on your brand as a whole, so cheap trinkets can make your brand look low-effort."

Items that are chintzy or generic tend to be left behind, said Selby, as do bulky items that won't easily fit in attendees' luggage.

"If swag doesn't feel useful or elevated, it fails to leave a lasting impression," she said.

T-shirts are a great example of what not to invest in, said Harrison. They're expensive to ship and store, hard to size correctly and often end up in the donation pile. If an item feels like a throwaway, then it's generally not a good promotional vehicle.

"It doesn't reflect well on your brand or the increasingly carbon-conscious consumers who stop by your table," she said.

Ideas for keepsake swag based on experts' faves

As an attendee, Selby said she gravitates toward items she can use long-term like "a beautifully designed tote or an elevated everyday basic."

"Think 'surprise and delight,'" she said. "These items integrate into my daily life and keep the event top-of-mind."

Harrison said personal favorites of hers included a sturdy tote bag that she still uses years later and a sleek notebook that made her "feel like the company 'got'

what I needed."

The most memorable swag Savage ever received was a tin full of cookie cutters.

"The event was right before the holidays, and the tin had a subtle logo on the lid," she said. "This was a favorite because it was usable, timely and the branding wasn't over the top."

Savage said another favorite is a cold brew coffee maker that she won as part of a business card raffle.

"It was a high-quality coffee maker with the company's logo on the front and was the only piece of swag that I kept from that particular conference," she said. "Again, usefulness and quality played a critical role."

**Where to source and how much to spend**

Savage said her firm typically sources its swag from Swag.com or local vendors who offer more customization and better quality control. Budgets can range from $5 to $25 per attendee, with more spent on VIP or targeted client gifts

"Supporting small vendors helps us offer more unique, meaningful swag, and it often aligns better with our audience's values," she said.

Selby said her firm sources items from a mix of high-quality suppliers and custom manufacturers, with budgets ranging anywhere from $1 to $1,000 per attendee for premium conference packages.

Harrison, who also tries to source locally as much as possible, said her budget varies, but that she'd rather spend a little more on fewer, better things that leave a lasting impression.

"In short, swag shouldn't be filler — it should be thoughtful, helpful and reflect who you are as a brand," she said.